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ABSTRACT

In Portugal, the word "literacy" acquired public importance in October 1995, in the first national literacy assessment report. In the last few years, "reading habits" and not "literacy" became a privileged research object, and it is the amount and kind of reading that is being measured, with the results taken as measures of literacy. These reading habits survey statistics function as a part of a "cultural model" which defines "what counts as normal and natural and what counts as inappropriate and deviant" (Gee, 2001). Four reading habits surveys, conducted in 1999 and 2000 in four different Portuguese cities, were scrutinized. Survey data had been collected in questionnaires answered by students ranging in age from 14 to 24. With little variation, all the questionnaires, together with questions about the primary socializing contexts of the students, privileged the same dimensions. Reading and literacy were conveyed as a set of fixed practices which do not depend on the contexts. But literacy changes as contexts change, literacy practices have broader social meanings and are "supported, sustained, learned, and impeded in people's lives and relationships" (Barton and Hamilton, 2000); they are not an individual matter but a community issue. In the surveys, when students showed that they read to be in the world, to know things, these facts are undervalued and the students' identities as readers are denied because they read the way they choose, the way they need: mostly for information. Book literacy is afforded a higher status than other forms of literacy, pushing into marginal places other literacies associated with other domains of life. (Contains 6 notes, a figure, and 18 references.) Data from the surveys are appended. (NKA)

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By

Maria de Lourdes Dionisio

Paper presented at the European Reading Conference
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LITERACIES, CONTEXTS AND PRACTICES*

Public devices for their definition

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1. Tracking the problem

Literacy is a fairly new word in Portuguese lexicon. Already used at the level of research and by the community of those who dealt with reading and writing both at educational level and social studies, we may say that the word literacy acquired public importance in October 1995, in the report of the first national literacy assessment.

For a while, together with a strong reaction against the word itself – closely associated with basic reading skills and "foreign trends" – several voices in the media claimed the "decline of culture". This "decline" was found i) in the low levels attained by the population and ii) in the "basic" reading objects and demands – "skills for written information processing in everyday life" (Benavente, coord., 1996) – that such reading test asked from individuals (CNE, 1996: 111).

At the level of the public Discourse[1], despite so many curricular and social questions raised by this first literacy report, the answers for such literacy rates were easily and quickly found in the low levels of reading habits (easier to see and measure...) that a previous national study had already identified and characterised (Freitas & Santos, 1992). Considered by many "socially relevant voices" – politicians, public figures, journalists ... experts – as an "obscure concept" (CNE, 1996: 78) and of very difficult characterisation and assessment it is almost understandable the immediate and unique association of literacy with reading habits. Therefore more than the discussion of literacy practices, or even the assumed skills, their nature or conditions for their improvement, for instance, it was "reading habits" that became most visibly the central issue in the public debate. In the last past years, "reading habits" and not "literacy" became a privileged research object both at academic and governmental levels (Master and

Ph. D. thesis have been written; a Foundation for the Study of Cultural Practices has been created).

From then on, it is the amount and kind of reading that is being measured being the results taken more or less immediately as measures of literacy.

2. Reading habits surveys – status and roles

One possible way to understand what literacy really is, why, when and how people engage with written texts, is by beginning giving particular "attention to the institutional processes whereby "truths" about literacy become translated into policy and practice" (Hamilton, 1999). Thus, my aim here is to discuss how reading habits surveys may be contributing to prevent literacy understanding – also at theoretical level – mainly in what literacy links to a range of broader social, economic and ideological aspects; how they may be contributing to maintain a narrow, strict definition of reading and a specific and very particular version of the reader. Doing this, I am trying to contest some public common sense, some "social visions and ideologies" made possible through devices such as these surveys, which by means of the facts they "create", the way they create them and the kind of the relationships they privilege and allow, produce and reproduce meanings and their values.

The high status I am giving here to such reading habits surveys comes from the position that some of them – and some of their claims – have at the level of public and institutional Discourse (almost all of them are sponsored and sometimes published by state agencies – the Ministry of Culture, for instance). At this level they integrate together with other objects, texts and practices[2] the discoursive formation that shape, in this case, the legitimate views of literacy and of the literate person. The fact that they are sustained by statistics adds to this privileged institutional position the power of the 'objective evidence' that easily 'feeds' the "moral panic" that periodically invades all societies (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

Functioning as a part of a ''cultural model'' which defines "what counts as normal and natural and what counts as inappropriate and deviant" (Gee, 2001), the echoes of these surveys have the power to influence the way people see

specific problems, putting pressure on schools, and teachers for instance, leading them to practices that may be more in accordance with the point of view of this particular formation.

The possibility that such reading habits surveys might inform "social practices" and might support cultural and educational policies it is not just a mere hypothesis. This role is explicitly stated in their goals, particularly when they claim that "information about reading habits is necessary for teachers and to a grounded educational policy" (Fortuna & Fontes, 1999). Even if some of these surveys assume their "descriptive nature" with "practical objectives", which don't justify, according to the authors, "theoretical considerations about reading" (Conde & Antunes, 2000) they also envision their contribution "as a response to the general problematic of literacy that has been growing as a national concern. As a relevant object of analysis and political intervention, namely through projects whose investigation about this problem may illuminate the measures needed to minimize illiteracy and social exclusion" (Conde & Antunes, 2000: 13-14). Aiming at contributing to understand literacy problems, which "nowadays endanger citizenship" (Fortuna & Fontes, 1999), these studies not only propose "to discover what students read and if they read" but also "to travel beyond the present into the future of the reading habits of people as far as it is possible to anticipate them from the present habits and practices" (Monteiro, 1999: 13). Although recognizing, some of them, the "social nature of reading [...] that it is structured by different processes" (Conde & Antunes, 2000: 13), the belief that the future will be a mirror of the present deletes some of the relevant dimensions of reading and literacy, particularly the fact that "literacy is historically situated" being "as fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000: 13).

2.1. Ways and words for defining THE literacy

In order to understand how these studies structure practices and their correlate values and in this way how they pattern models of behaviour, defining what is the significant reading, who is entitled to be considered a reader, therefore who is entitled to enter and to belong to a social group which is socially

recognised as being distinctive, I scrutinised four reading habits surveys[3], conducted in 1999 and in 2000, in four different Portuguese cities. The data of these four surveys have been collected using a questionnaire to be answered by students whose age ranged from 14 to 24.

The first thing that must be said about the four instruments used in the inquiry is that they are almost exactly the same and very much alike the national survey of 1992[4], by this means integrating a broader process of reproduction and of power relations[5]. With small variation, all questionnaires, together with questions about the primary socializing contexts of the students, give privilege to the same dimensions through questions and items such the following examples:

- Do you read regularly?
- What's the main motive for not reading regularly?
  Processing difficulties; Prefers to do other things; Doesn't like reading; Doesn't have time; Other motive.
- In this moment are you reading any book not for school?
- How many books other than those for school did you read last year?
- Do you like reading?
- Per week how much time do you spent approximately in reading books not for school?
- What kind of books do you prefer? Put a mark on the following list// What type of non scholar books do you usually read?[6]
- How long ago have you read your last book?
- Mark no more than three possibilities concerning your reading purposes.

When the questions are the same all over the years and places although they are intended to different persons, living and studying in different contexts, it is being erased the role of relevant dimensions, such as social conditions – namely pedagogical ones – that structure literacy events. Reading and ultimately literacy is conveyed here as a set of fixed practices which don't depend on the contexts, acquired once for good and highly dependent on the individuals' will.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu teaches us that if we want to understand reading we have to inquire, before all, how readers are formed, in what places, under which circumstances (particularly discoursive ones). Accordingly we have to ask: what kind of relation is established between reading practices and, for instance, curricular changes? Are there differences between the

school libraries of those four cities? Do these students have access to libraries? What are the libraries characteristics? How many hours of free time are those students allowed? What are the patterns of classroom reading practices? The answers to previous questions like these will allow understanding that literacy changes as contexts change, that literacies practices have broader social meanings and that they are "supported, sustained, learned and impeded in people's lives and relationships" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000: 12), that they aren't an individual matter but a community issue.

If the questionnaire through its questions may be taken as a discoursive device that, from the very beginning, positions readers in relation to a specific version of reading, the description and the interpretation of the data, more than everything else, contribute to the (re)production of that specific version.

Consider for the moment some of the surveys conclusions synthesised in Figure 1 according to the following general categories: Purposes, Characteristics of the reading practices and readers, Objects, Libraries, General comments.

In the judgements of value – disguised as facts – that run through almost all of the comments, reading for learning, for knowledge is not valued on the ground that this puts in danger "future reading". We can conclude that in this "cultural model" the kind of reading one will have to do after leaving school will be only the "aesthetic one", reading to occupy leisure time and for fruition. The legitimate reading – the good one – is that which is done for pleasure, as an end in itself. But people, as David Barton (1994) says, "do things for a reason. In general, people do not read in order to read; rather, people read and write in order to do other things" (p. 49). And these comments plus the data that gave them origin (see some of the row data in Appendix A) show exactly that students read for updating knowledge, for learning, for acquiring information – which seems quite understandable: they are students after all.

Obviously a great part of us read for pleasure, sometimes also as an end, not as a means, to occupy leisure time, just to enjoy ourselves. However we have to be aware that this is only one possibility of practice among many others involving written texts, but this is may be the smallest one in the totality of our lives. "In varied communities, literary reading and writing are a relatively minor part of

people's everyday lives", Luke, O'Brien & Comber (2001: 112) remind us, calling attention to the works of Barton & Ivanic (1991) and Heath (1986). Seeing this separation between reading for knowledge and for pleasure from another angle, it must be said that the underlying assumption is also very strange as it isn't necessarily true that reading for personal purposes and needs has to be a boring task.

Personal reading views and purposes	• Reading for learning not for pleasure • Reading is viewed as learning, formation and knowledge • Reading for updating knowledge • It's a kind of "applied reading" ... endangering future reading • Among older students it prevails an instrumental view of reading • Reading for exams ... this means that the end of school will be the end of reading • This growing use of reading for school purposes constrains the desire for more uncommitted reading practices
Characteristics of the reading practices and of the **readers**	• Reading is not a regular practice among half of the students • Young people read less than it is convenient • Low levels of reading of books • *Fast* reading - privilege to newspapers and magazines • Parcelled reading therefore inattentive readers • Specialised readings; curricular readings • Very low levels of reading of books other than those for school purposes • Day-by-day, fragmented reading • Very low levels of hours for reading ... not sufficient to become a reader • Using the computer doesn't mean a solid reading competence
Reading objects	• Books as tools • Privilege to magazines, newspapers, computer... endanger the book • A great number of the books mentioned belongs to the school curriculum
Libraries	• Use of libraries mostly for research or study • Very low levels of those who use library for pleasure • Very low levels of requisition of books other than those for school
General comments	• Contradiction between what is said and what is really done - reading is recognised as important but... • Student's don't develop reading for pleasure... future reading is in danger • The possibility to exercise citizenship is at risk • School doesn't motivate for reading • School impinge on students a limited view of reading values • The quality of future citizenship is won or lost during this period of life

Figure 1. Synthesis of the main conclusions of the four surveys

In this context, if reading for pleasure is the valued practice, the one that is appropriate, the standard according to which all reading practices are to be measured, when it comes the time for characterising and evaluating the amount of students reading, the negative results are almost natural and expected. As it can be seen in Figure 1, as far as reading practices are concerned, "they aren't regular among half of the students". They are "parcelled", "fragmented", words that by no means are emptied of negative meanings.

At this point it's almost inevitable to ask about the kind of reading those conclusions are referring to. The answer is obvious if we consider the questions exemplified above and the synthesised conclusions. In the first place, they are referring to the reading of books. As the students read for learning and the privileged reading objects are said to be "magazines, newspapers, computer..." or books for "specialized/curricular readings", books "for research", the only book that seems to allow pleasure is a very special one. Not that one for school purposes, not the one to become a computer/sports/electrician/... expert, these are for information, but the Book, this is literature (although never 'said aloud' and more, never "said why"). Looking things this way, the real meaning of "Reading is not a regular practice..." is "Reading of literature is not a regular practice...".

What is being instantiated by means of these surveys is that the "normal" reading is the literary one. To read a book to get some kind of information is to use it as a tool, which is a deviant behaviour in the "cultural model" that these surveys convey and, ultimately, inform. If we took the hermeneutics a little further, it would be possible to see how literature is being emptied from functions other than to occupy leisure time and merely reduced to a symbolical role while the readers are being constituted almost only as "consumers of stories" (Lankshear & Knobel, 1998: 162-163).

Reading for information among these students is almost natural, particularly if we take into account the social contexts to which they belong, even when literature is the issue. At this particular time of their life literary canon is a curricular object and students have to read it for several purposes. Literature is

for these students strongly tied to hard work, what might explain the preferences for other kinds of reading and for other cultural practices to spend leisure time.

To envision reading from such perspective subtly leads to the consideration of readers as "strong - weak", "attentive - inattentive" (see Kinds of readers in Appendix A) – words that are thoroughly value laden and not so euphemistically participate in the constitution of the reader's identity. But it is not only the reader that sees his/her identity being constituted. Seen from this narrow perspective libraries, for instance, are committed purposes that reduce their universal attributions: to allow people to have access to all kinds of information regardless of its support and in order to satisfy their information needs. In the students answers they go there to "research" and "study" (Figure 1 - Libraries and General comments).

These surveys claim the importance of reading and literacy for the exercise of citizenship. However when the students show that they read to be in the world, to know things, that they somehow participate in society, these facts are undervalued and the students' identities as readers are denied because they read the way they choose, the way they need: mostly for information (see in Appendix A the percentages of those who say to read books other than those for school).

Looked at this way the "contradiction" that is said to exist between what students say concerning their readings and what is really done (from the researchers' point of view) is indeed only apparent. Students read for their purposes therefore identifying themselves as readers, but when they are supposed to say what books they read, how much time they spent reading books not for information, the answers they could give don't fit the questionnaire items nor their answers are given value. Students and researchers are not speaking the same language. They are actually speaking of different realities. They are moving inside different Discourses.

3. Conclusion

Four recent Portuguese reading habits surveys have been scrutinised under the assumption that, on the one hand, the way literacy practices are assessed, judged or even spoken of is another device of a broader process where economies, politics and ideologies play a relevant role and that, on the other hand, through the words produced by means of that device a version of the world is being shaped and reshaped. Particularly in a historical moment where the issue literacy is growing both at the level of its conceptualisation and of political and educational concern it seems crucial to analyse such surveys according to the literacy version they are supporting at the same time they are supported by.

Without aiming at a quantitative analysis, it was possible to identify some constant features that contribute to recover the meanings and values that structure and sustain a narrow definition of reading and literacy as well as of who can be considered a reader or literate. Integrating the continuous "recycling" process of prevalent ideas, everything in these surveys conveys a "literary discourse" (cf. Barton, 1994: 168) about reading. Book literacy is afforded a higher status than other forms of literacy, pushing into marginal places other literacies associated with other domains of life. Pushing these literacies to these marginal places, individuals are being pushed as well and conflicting reading positions are being created.

The practices that are characterised in these studies let us perceive the nature of the social context to which these students belong in this particular moment of their lives as well as the kind of literacy demands this context requires from them: to learn, to acquire information, to research, to study. Students in these questionnaires speak about reading as a situated practice while these studies speak about an autonomous one. Although all of these four surveys take into consideration the socializing contexts of these students and their specificities, the facts these surveys produce and give relevance don't value the particular uses of literacy people need and use in certain roles (cf. Barton, 1994).

As I tried to show here, keeping reducing literacy and reading discussion to the amount of books reading, the most relevant role of these surveys is the reinforcement of a prevalent Discourse, supplementing its particular model of

literacy and of literacy education. In a way that the researchers didn't necessarily and objectively aimed, the model that they instantiate is the one that doesn't value the plural and significant practices that link school and the whole world around, which may link school and students' lives outside it. To deny these plural practices is a way to condemn significant practices and significant people to oblivion; it is also to participate in a process of restricting the access and participation in civic life to a great part of the population.

Notes

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[1] Discourse with a capital D, as in Gee (1999; 2001) in order to distinguish from the meaning of discourse, "language in use".

[2] Among these objects, texts and practices, the media and the school textbooks are particularly relevant (cf. Castro, 2000, Dionísio, 2000a, 2000b).

[3] The four surveys used for this analysis are the following:

1. Fortuna & Fontes (1999);
2. Conde & Antunes (2000);
3. Marques (2000);
4. Monteiro (1999).

[4] It must be noted that the comparison of the results was not among the surveys goals, although sometimes, along the discussion, comparisons are done both to stress the conclusions and to legitimate the comments on those conclusions.

[5] Some of these surveys are conducted in the context of post-graduation courses where the teachers not only, in some cases, correspond to the authors of the previous national studies but also have key positions in the Foundation that sponsors the students' research.

[6] The list of items for this question in Survey 2, for instance, is the following: Art/ Theatre/ Poetry; Comics; Technical/ Scientific; Short Stories/ Novels/ Romance; Cooking/ Bricolage; Encyclopaedias/ Dictionaries; Erotic; Scientific fiction; Historical/ Biographies; Adolescent; Thrillers/ Espionage; Political/ Philosophical; Religion; Terror/ Mystery; Travelling/Adventures; Other type, which.

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APPENDIX A - Some of the data of the four surveys

	Survey 1 Coimbra	Survey 2 Almada/Seixal	Survey 3 Évora	Survey 4 Beja
Population and age	**520** **14-18**	**222** **14-16**	**482** **14-22**	**113** **< 24**
Reading habits Likes reading	Books not for school YES - 45,1% ~~NO - 5,3%~~	YES - 66,8% ~~80,5%~~	YES - 64,3% NO - 29,9%	Books YES - 62 %
Reading personal meanings	Learning /information - 42% Imagination - 30% Leisure time - 17% Older student knowledge-49,1%	Learning - 43,6% Imagination - 25,1%	Pleasure/imagination - 25% Leisure time - 16% Learning needs - 19%	Pleasure - 85% Duty - 13%
Personal reasons for reading	Personal growth - 98% To get a good job - 73%	Personal growth - 94% To know/To learn - 97,2% To get a good job - 56,7%	For pleasure - 22% Curiosity - 16%	For knowledge - 65% School exams - 18%
Kinds of readers 1* (books other than those for school) * Weak reader - 1-5 books/year average " - 6-10 " strong " - > 10 "	Week readers - 64% Average readers - 14 % Strong readers - 15 %	Week readers - 69,4% Average readers - 7,7 % Strong readers - 8,1 %	Week readers - 54,1 % Average readers - 22,2 % Strong readers - 13,6 %	Week readers - 46 % Average readers - 34 % Strong readers - 11 %
Kinds of readers 2* Usual - declares to read everyday Present - is reading at the moment Attentive - identifies author & title Inattentive - unable to identify	Usual - 73,6 Present - 47,7% Attentive - 70 % Inattentive - 30 %	Usual - 66,8 Present - 33 % Attentive - 63,9 % Inattentive - 36,1 %	Usual - 51 % Present - 41%	Usual - 62 % Present - 40,5%
Reading Objects	(Daily reading objects) Books (not for school) -19,1% Magazines - 22,3% Newspapers - 36%	Books - 36,5% Magazines - 97,3% Newspapers - 83,2%	Books - 68,5 % Magazines - 53% Newspapers - 35% Computer - 24 %	Books - 62 % Magazines - 51 % Newspapers -39 %
Types of reading* **Cumulative** - readers of books, magazines and newspapers **Parcelled** - 1/2 of above objects	Cumulative reading - 16 % Parcelled reading - 33%	Cumulative read. -30,3 % Parcelled read. - 69,7%	Cumulative read. -13 % Parcelled read. - 79 %	Cumulative -16 % Parcelled - 84%
Preferred Books	Everything - 66% Adventures - 39 % Romance/novel -38,5 BD - 27,4 Scientific/Technical -22,1% Arts - 17,8	BD (nr.ref) - 56 Adventures - 40 Arts - 38 Travels - 33 Romance/novel - 25 Everything -19	Adventures - 12,9 % Romance/novel - 10,5 BD - 9,8 Scientific/Technical - 8,2 Encyclopedia/Dic. - 5,5	—
Use of the library	—	YES - 63 % Several days/week - 6,9 Once a week - 17,2 Once a month - 47,1 % < once/month - 28,7	Several days/week - 20,5 Once a week - 13,5 Once a month -17,6 % Now and then - 32 % Never - 11,6 %	Daily - 30,1 % 2/3 x-week -41,1 Now & then - 8,6 %